

The weakest link in welfare state legitimacy: European perceptions of moral and administrative failure in the targeting of social benefits

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Femke Roosma

Tilburg University, The Netherlands

Wim van Oorschot

KU Leuven, Belgium

John Gelissen

Tilburg University, The Netherlands

Abstract

In the field of welfare attitude research, generally studies examining critical attitudes toward the welfare state are rather limited. However, the existing studies find that people are most negative about the mis-targeting of welfare benefits – that is, people are particularly critical of the high overuse (misuse or fraud) and high underuse (non-take-up) of welfare benefits. This study contributes to the current literature by more extensively analyzing perceptions of the overuse and underuse of welfare benefits by revealing the underlying perceptions of moral failure or failed administrative implementation. We also assess how different individual- and contextual-level factors influence those perceptions. We use data from the European Social Survey 2008/2009 for 25 European countries. We find that instead of representing two manifestations of the same concept of mis-targeting, perceptions of the overuse and underuse of benefits appear to be driven by normative ideas and opinions about the administrative effectiveness of the welfare state. Whereas normative ideas about the overuse of benefits are mainly influenced by people's political ideology and the selectivity of the redistribution system, ideas about the effectiveness of benefits are mainly influenced by people's institutional trust, the quality of the welfare state and the economic context. We conclude that critical attitudes toward the welfare state have multiple dimensions and can be both substantive and procedural in nature.

Keywords

Benefit abuse, European Social Survey, non-take-up, public opinion, welfare attitudes, welfare states

Corresponding author:

Femke Roosma, Department of Sociology, Tilburg University, P.O. Box 90153, 5000 LE Tilburg, The Netherlands.

Email: f.roosma@uvt.nl

Introduction

In previous decades, welfare attitude research focused on what was called the ‘positive’ elements of the welfare state. Most of these studies built their analyses on survey questions that ask people whether they would like to see more government spending on various social programs and/or whether government should take more responsibility for providing social welfare (for instance, Blekesaune and Quadagno, 2003; Brooks and Manza, 2007; Gelissen, 2000; Meier Jæger, 2007; Svallfors, 2003). In focusing on the responsibilities of the welfare state and the amount of social spending, most studies in the field addressed the condition of *substantive justice* that is an essential element of welfare state legitimacy (Rothstein, 1998). This condition demands that the public supports welfare programs as such and that these programs be considered just and fair. However, Rothstein (1998) argued that the welfare state should also fulfill the conditions of both *redistributive justice* – a fair distribution of contributions to the welfare state – and *procedural justice* – an effective and efficient implementation of welfare policies. Although welfare attitudes are crucial for understanding the legitimacy of the welfare state, there is little research on comparative welfare attitudes that focuses not only on whether people believe that the distribution of contributions is fair, but also on whether the implementation of welfare is effective and efficient.

Welfare support studies that include both items that measure preferences for government spending and responsibility and items that measure issues of redistributive and procedural justice all suggest that a focus on ‘positive’ items only may offer a too-rosy picture of the legitimacy of the welfare state (Roosma et al., 2012; Sihvo and Uusitalo, 1995a; Van Oorschot and Meuleman, 2011). Those studies invariably show that the European public is relatively critical of not only the performance and outcomes of welfare systems (especially in Southern and Eastern Europe) but also procedural justice: the European public tends to perceive that their countries’ welfare systems have relatively high degrees of bureaucracy and low degrees of both efficiency and effectiveness (Roosma et al., 2012). More specifically, studies that examine critical attitudes toward the welfare state conclude that people are most critical about the mis-targeting of welfare benefits in terms of both the abuse and the non-take-up of benefits (Edlund, 1999; Ervasti, 1998, 2012; Goul Andersen, 1999; Halvorsen, 2002). In other words, European people strongly support the state’s provision of welfare but are critical about the process through which that provision takes place, especially with respect to targeting benefits to the people who belong to the (perceived) target population. If we want to make claims about the social legitimacy of welfare states, we should examine these critical perceptions of the mis-targeting of benefits more closely.

The mis-targeting of welfare benefits contains both an element of overuse of benefits (i.e. benefit abuse or misuse) and an element of underuse (i.e. the non-take-up of benefits). Several scholars find that attitudes toward overuse and underuse are only weakly related: a person’s perception of the overuse of benefits does not say much about his or her perception of underuse (Ervasti, 2012; Roosma et al., 2012; Sihvo and Uusitalo, 1995a). Therefore, overuse and underuse perceptions do not seem to be complementary parts of one perceived concept of ineffective redistribution. This raises questions about what perceptions of mis-targeting actually entail. What types of underlying welfare attitudes play a role when people observe mis-targeted benefits?

In this article, we contribute to knowledge about the critical aspects of welfare legitimacy by providing a more detailed analysis of perceptions of mis-targeting of social benefits in European welfare states. We inspect the underlying attitudes that establish perceptions of over- and underuse and distinguish normative perceptions of moral failure and perceptions of failed administrative implementation. We formulate three research questions: (1) What are the European public’s perceptions of the mis-targeting of welfare benefits with respect to both over- and underuse? (2) What underlying attitudes establish perceptions of the mis-targeting of welfare benefits? (3) Which

individual and contextual factors are associated with Europeans' perceptions of the mis-targeting of welfare benefits?

Perceptions of the mis-targeting of welfare benefits

Targeting benefits and services most generally means that social policies are directed to specific categories of citizens under specific conditions. The more strictly the target population is defined, the more selective the social policy. Only those who are considered to be deserving of a benefit should be eligible for it, and all who are eligible for the benefit should receive it. In the event that the actual distribution of benefits and services deviates from this ideal, we define mis-targeting (Van Oorschot, 2001). The concept of mis-targeting can be evaluated from the perspective of redistributional justice: does the target population really deserve these benefits? In addition, mis-targeting can be evaluated from the perspective of procedural justice: is the target population (as opposed to the non-targeted population) eligible for the benefit and does the eligible population (as opposed to the non-eligible population) actually receive this benefit?

Mis-targeting can involve either the overuse or underuse of benefits or both. Underuse means that people who are seen as deserving of benefits do not belong to the target population or (when they do belong to the target population) are not eligible for benefits or do not receive the (full) benefit or service for which they are eligible. This can be either unintentional (e.g. due to ignorance of social rights or administrative mistakes) or intentional (when, for example, a benefit is not claimed for fear of stigmatization or out of shame). Overuse refers specifically to situations in which people receive a benefit or service while they are not seen as deserving of that benefit or for which they are not (fully) eligible. If overuse is intentional, the term 'welfare fraud' or 'welfare abuse' is used; unintentional overuse may be called 'unintended' overuse or misuse.

Previous empirical studies of mis-targeting mostly focused on perceptions of benefit overuse. These studies all find large proportions of populations perceiving overuse of welfare benefits (Ervasti, 1998, 2012; Goul Andersen, 1999; Halvorsen, 2002). In European comparative studies that analyze attitudes toward a broad range of welfare dimensions, perceived overuse is often standing in stark contrast to mostly positive perceptions of social programs and social rights (Roosma et al., 2012; Sihvo and Uusitalo, 1995a; Svallfors, 1991; Van Oorschot and Meuleman, 2011). Moreover, in studies in which overuse is analyzed as part of other critical welfare attitudes – for example, the bureaucracy of the welfare state or the idea that welfare makes people lazy – it often appears as the most problematic issue perceived by the public (Ervasti, 1998, 2012; Goul Andersen, 1999; Halvorsen, 2002). What receives less attention is that Europeans also tend to see relatively large degrees of underuse of social benefits (Ervasti, 2012; Roosma et al., 2012).

Overuse and underuse perceptions can be related in different ways. First, from a theoretical perspective, we see these perceptions as two related sub-dimensions of the larger concept of perceived mis-targeting, meaning that if people perceive mis-targeting, they see both overuse and underuse. However, the few studies that analyze overuse and underuse perceptions in combination find only small intercorrelations between the two (Ervasti, 2012; Roosma et al., 2012; Sihvo and Uusitalo, 1995a), which suggests that both concepts are relatively independent of one another. Second, and consequently, overuse and underuse perceptions are two distinct, unrelated concepts, as implied by Ervasti's (2012) argument that overuse and underuse 'measure different types of welfare state criticism' (p. 245).

We want to add a third possibility, which is that overuse and underuse perceptions are based upon two different underlying attitudes, which in turn, at a deeper level, are both related to mis-targeting. In this respect, our idea is that the concept of mis-targeting contains both a moral or normative element and a procedural or administrative element. This perspective recognizes that

some people intentionally attempt to abuse the system and some people unintentionally receive something that they do not deserve or for which they are not eligible. Benefit overuse can thus be considered a consequence either of moral failure or of administrative faults. In addition, benefit underuse can be the result of moral barriers such as feelings of shame or stigmatization among (potential) beneficiaries. Alternatively, it can be the result of administrative mistakes or ineffective implementation (Van Oorschot, 1995). These normative and administrative aspects might also play a role in evaluating the occurrence of the overuse and the underuse of benefits. Perceptions of high overuse can express a moral rejection of expected benefit abuse, or conversely, it can express a lack of trust in the system's effectiveness. Perceiving high underuse of benefits can express either a normative judgment that sees the target population as too strictly defined by policymakers or a lack of trust in the system's effectiveness.

This distinction between normative attitudes toward the welfare state and attitudes formed by the perceived effectiveness of the welfare state's administrative practices can be found in the welfare state support literature (Offe, 1987; Rothstein, 1998). Rothstein (1998) distinguishes normative support for the welfare state and the necessity of perceived effectiveness of the implementation of the welfare system. Additionally, Offe (1987) argues that legitimacy depends not only on the normative justifiability of the welfare state but also on experiences with the outcomes. Attitudes about the welfare state are 'rationally formed in response to perceived social realities as well as to the actual experiences with the practice of existing welfare states' (Offe, 1987: 535). Attitudes about the mis-targeting of benefits could contain both this more normative substantive judgment about whether benefits are fairly distributed and a procedural judgment about whether the administrative implementation of this redistribution is effective.

Individual factors influencing mis-targeting perceptions

Before we report the empirical findings, we introduce our expectations regarding the association between individual and contextual covariates and perceptions of mis-targeting. The previous studies that relate overuse and underuse perceptions to various individual-level covariates already provide clues. Most prominently, they find that ideology or party preference affect perceptions of both overuse and (to a lesser extent) underuse, where people with a right-wing political preference see higher overuse and lower underuse (Ervasti, 1998, 2012; Halvorsen, 2002; Sihvo and Uusitalo, 1995a; Van Oorschot and Meuleman, 2011). Most studies also find a positive effect of income on overuse perceptions, although Ervasti (2012) reports a small negative effect. Moreover, education seems to be a relatively stable factor associated with overuse and underuse perceptions, where higher education reduces overuse and underuse perceptions (Ervasti, 1998, 2012; Halvorsen, 2002; Sihvo and Uusitalo, 1995a; Van Oorschot and Meuleman, 2011). Finally, the few significant effects of occupational class and employment status found in previous research differ among countries and studies. Given this inconclusive empirical evidence provided by existing studies, it is necessary to address the associated individual and contextual covariates of overuse and underuse perceptions more theoretically.

First, we expect a relationship between structural position and (especially) normative perceptions of mis-targeting. In the literature, we find two different theories, both of which are introduced as competing hypotheses by Maassen and De Goede (1989), in which people's structural position (by which we mean people's level of income, education, and/or job status) is believed to shape their perceptions of the mis-targeting of benefits: *identification theory* and *competition theory*. Identification theory (Maassen and De Goede, 1989) suggests that because people occupying a lower structural position are at a higher risk of becoming dependent on welfare benefits, they are better able to identify with welfare recipients and therefore see less overuse and more underuse of

benefits. Additionally, to extend the interpretation of identification theory, people who have experienced benefit dependency or who have family members that rely on benefits are less suspicious of benefit abuse because they can better identify with beneficiaries. Generally, people who identify more strongly with beneficiaries perceive less intentional overuse and see more underuse because they may have a clearer eye for people's shame about taking up benefits due to the stigmatization of benefit recipients. In contrast, people in a higher structural position or without a history of either benefit dependency or relatives relying on benefits presumably cannot easily identify with benefit recipients' feelings of shame and stigmatization and see less underuse of benefits. The fact that people with high incomes must contribute more to welfare redistribution does make them more suspicious of potential abuse.

An alternative relationship between people's structural position and perceptions of mis-targeting is suggested by competition theory. Here, Maassen and De Goede (1989) argue that people who are at risk of becoming dependent on benefits feel that they are in competition with welfare recipients. Occupation of a lower structural position increases the fear that people who abuse benefits will jeopardize the welfare system; therefore, the overuse of benefits is considered a substantial problem. People occupying a higher structural position, who do not feel competitive with respect to the welfare state's scarce resources (or who feel less of a sense of competition), consequently see less overuse. Therefore, there are two conflicting theories about the influence of structural position (or structural position in the past or the position of relatives) on perceptions of mis-targeting. Occupying a lower structural position can lead to the normative perception either that access to the welfare state is too strict (identification theory) or that access to the welfare state is too easy, resulting in benefit abuse (competition theory).

Second, with respect to individuals' ideological preferences, empirical studies have found that people with left-wing sympathies favor a more generous redistribution (Andress and Heien, 2001; Arts and Gelissen, 2001; Hasenfeld and Rafferty, 1989; Meier Jæger, 2006). With respect to our welfare attitudes of interest – perceptions of mis-targeting – we expect that people supporting left-wing politics, who therefore favor a more generous redistribution, will tend to the normative judgment that access to the welfare state is too strict: we expect them to believe that it is too difficult for people 'in real need' to obtain a benefit. Conversely, we assume that people with right-wing sympathies will tend to see access as too easy and that they will perceive more abuse of benefits. We note that theoretically, it is possible that attitudes about welfare determine political orientation and that the causal effect is thus reversed. However, a study by Meier Jæger (2008) using an instrumental variable approach shows that political self-orientation precedes the formulation of an attitude toward the welfare state.

Third, we hypothesize a relationship between social trust and perceptions in mis-targeting. People with low interpersonal trust do not believe in other individuals' good intentions. It is therefore logical to assume that low-trusting individuals will expect others to cheat or abuse the collective system. We therefore expect that low-trusting individuals will more easily see the moral flaws of mis-targeting. In addition, we believe that institutional trust is an important determinant of the perception of effective administrative targeting. Trust in institutions establishes trust in these institutions' ability to redistribute welfare in a fair and effective manner. Therefore, we expect that high trust in institutions is associated not only with perceptions of effective targeting that are more positive but also with lower perceptions of overuse and underuse. We note that high perceived overuse and underuse could also lead to erosion of the social contract and trust in both institutions and one's fellow citizens. It is likely that there is also a feedback effect, in which high trust leads to low perceived mis-targeting and low perceived mis-targeting increases societal trust levels. In addition, we note that despite the fact that some studies do not find a clear empirical link between institutional trust and attitudes related to substantive justice such as the role of the state (Edlund, 2006; Svallfors,

1999, 2002), other studies do find evidence of a relationship between trust in the government and elements of procedural justice, such as the implementation of tax policies and attitudes toward financial cheating (Edlund, 1999, 2006; Svallfors, 2002).

Finally, we argue that information or knowledge about the practical aspects of the redistribution system has an important effect. From the literature on tax attitudes, it is known that more knowledge increases satisfaction with the distribution of taxes (Eriksen and Fallan, 1996). Along the same line of reasoning, we expect people who are more informed about the implementation of benefit redistribution to be more convinced that this redistribution will be effective. Although educational background might only be an indirect (and therefore not very effective) measure of knowledge about the effectiveness of the welfare redistribution, we expect that a higher educational background, holding all other socio-economic background characteristics constant, is associated with lower perceived mis-targeting. Previous research has found stable effects of educational background on overuse and underuse perceptions (Ervasti, 1998, 2012; Halvorsen, 2002; Sihvo and Uusitalo, 1995a; Van Oorschot and Meuleman, 2011).

Contextual factors influencing moral and administrative mis-targeting perceptions

Only a few studies have examined national differences in perceptions of overuse and underuse. Edlund (1999) concludes, after comparing Norwegian and American attitudes on financial cheating, that conflicts over welfare abuse show more cross-country variation than do attitudes about redistribution. Ervasti (2012) finds that people in Southern and Eastern European countries perceive higher underuse of benefits than do people in other European countries; this study does not discuss country-level effects on perceptions of overuse. It is reasonable to say that cross-national differences related to overuse and underuse perceptions have not been thoroughly examined.

The most apparent national characteristic influencing perceptions of mis-targeting is a country's actual percentages of benefit overuse and underuse. Individuals might notice whether welfare recipients in a particular country engage in a substantial amount of fraudulent behavior, or if many people in need do not receive financial support through country-level mass communication by the government or the media. However, data are available on actual overuse and underuse of welfare benefits for only a few countries. Occasional data on (non-) take-up rates of social benefits are available for Denmark, France, Germany and the Netherlands (Hernanz et al., 2004; Van Oorschot, 1995). However, only the United Kingdom regularly produces official estimates of benefit fraud and take-up rates (Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), 2012a, 2012b). Moreover, many authors of single-country studies address the accuracy of their data because those data estimate benefit abuse based on numerous assumptions (Frick and Groh-Samberg, 2007; Hernanz et al., 2004; Kayser and Frick, 2000). The limited availability of incomparable data renders a comparative analysis impossible. We believe that because hardly any data are available, people most likely are unaware of actual mis-targeting in their country, and actual mis-targeting might, therefore, only marginally influence perceptions of overuse and underuse. Nevertheless, this study is limited by its inability to take this variable into account.

We now introduce three contextual covariates that might influence individual perceptions of mis-targeting. The first covariate is the amount of redistribution, which we argue will especially affect normative perceptions of mis-targeting. If the amount of welfare redistribution in a country is low, people can develop a perception of underuse because they see that those in need do not receive adequate benefits. At the same time, a country's high level of welfare redistribution may strengthen individual perceptions that public money is wasted on beneficiaries, thus (following the same line of reasoning) leading to stronger perceptions of overuse. Because in the latter case the perceived amount of social spending applies, whereas in the former case the

perceived effect of redistribution is of interest, we use these two different measures for this hypothesized effect.

Second, one popular explanatory factor in the welfare attitude literature is welfare design in terms of welfare regime types (Albrekt Larsen, 2006; Arts and Gelissen, 2001). A specific element of the different welfare regime types (Esping-Andersen, 1990) is the difference between universal and targeted benefits (Korpi and Palme, 1998). We expect this particular difference in the institutional design of the welfare state to influence perceptions about the mis-targeting of welfare benefits. The argument can be made that in countries with more targeted (e.g. selective) benefit schemes compared to universal benefit schemes, where beneficiaries traditionally must fulfill more criteria to become eligible for a benefit (for instance, by means and/or assets tests for the individual or the household, or by complying with job-search requirements), people might be more concerned about the underuse of benefits. Simultaneously, in selective welfare states, people may see a lower risk of overuse because actual access to benefits is very strictly regulated, while in more universal welfare states, people may be more concerned with overuse of benefits because misuse would affect the welfare state more. However, and to the contrary, several studies argue that in countries with more selective policies, people are more suspicious of overuse (Coughlin, 1980; Edlund, 1999; Rothstein, 1998; Svallfors, 1991). That is, when the welfare system imposes many and relatively complex criteria for selecting its target group, there are more rules that can be broken, and people may paradoxically perceive more overuse in general. In countries with welfare systems that historically developed more targeted benefit schemes, people may be focused on potential abuse or misuse of benefits: do the people who receive a benefit really meet all of the criteria, or are they cheating? In countries with traditionally more accessible benefit schemes, such as universal welfare states, these concerns may be smaller: because many citizens are included, there is less reason to be suspicious of potential misuse (Rothstein, 1998). We therefore expect that in countries with historically more selective benefit schemes, as opposed to more universal benefit schemes, normative perceptions of the overuse of benefits may be at a higher level. In addition, we expect that selective benefit schemes will have a positive effect on perceptions of administrative flaws in mis-targeting. As noted above, selective benefit schemes impose many criteria and rules, which make the system more vulnerable to administrative mistakes and flaws compared to a system in which everybody is included.

Our third contextual-level explanation suggests a relationship between the economic situation in a country and perceptions of mis-targeting. Previous research shows that in Sweden, perceptions of benefit abuse fluctuate over time (Svallfors, 2011). There can be different explanations for this phenomenon, but one common explanation for fluctuating welfare attitudes is a country's economic situation (Jeene et al., 2013). In the literature, two opposing hypotheses are suggested that can be related to the identification and competition theory that we previously introduced at the individual level. On the one hand, different authors suggest that in a national situation of economic hardship and higher unemployment, people are more inclined to identify themselves with the situation of those depending on benefits because they are more aware of the general need for support (Sihvo and Uusitalo, 1995b) and beneficiaries' inability to change their situation (Fridberg and Ploug, 2000). On the other hand, it is suggested that in times of economic hardship, people become less altruistic and care more for themselves (Alt, 1979; Durr, 1993); therefore, they are more suspicious of others abusing benefits. Using longitudinal data, Jeene et al. (2013) test which of these hypotheses apply to perceptions of the deservingness of benefits claimants. They find support for the competition theory: economic hardship and times of unemployment cause people to be less generous to beneficiaries. Unfortunately, because we rely on cross-sectional data, we cannot measure effects over time. This restricts us from accurately modeling an effect of economic hardship as longitudinal. However, using the current year's unemployment rate and in particular the decrease/

Table 1. Operationalization and descriptive statistics of mis-targeting perceptions.

Scale 1–5	% (Strongly) agree	% (Strongly) disagree	Mean	Standard deviation
Most unemployed do <i>not</i> really try to <i>find a job</i>	39	38	3.034	1.104
Many people manage to <i>obtain benefits</i> and services to which they are not entitled	64	16	3.620	.957
Employees often <i>pretend</i> that they are sick in order to stay home	38	36	3.029	1.071
Many people with very low incomes get <i>less benefits</i> than they are legally entitled to	52	21	3.394	.973
There are <i>insufficient benefits</i> in (country) to help the people who are in real need	63	19	3.603	1.021

increase in the unemployment compared to the previous year, we attempt to estimate this effect as accurately as possible. We use unemployment rate change instead of economic growth because people experience that more directly.

Data and methods

We use data from the European Social Survey, Round 4, 2008/2009. This survey provides an extended module on welfare state attitudes. We selected 25 of the 29 European countries ($N=47,489$): Belgium (BE), Bulgaria (BG), Switzerland (CH), Cyprus (CY), the Czech Republic (CZ), Germany (DE), Denmark (DK), Estonia (EE), Spain (ES), Finland (FI), France (FR), the United Kingdom (GB), Greece (GR), Croatia (HR), Hungary (HU), Ireland (IE), Latvia (LV), the Netherlands (NL), Norway (NO), Poland (PL), Portugal (PT), Romania (RO), Sweden (SE), Slovenia (SI) and Slovakia (SK).¹

The survey has five items that measure perceptions of mis-targeting in the context of attitudes toward the welfare state. Three of them are perceptions of overuse: ‘people are not trying to find a job’, ‘obtaining benefits to which they are not entitled’ and ‘not working and pretending to be sick’. Two measure perceptions of underuse: ‘people get less benefits than they are entitled to’ and ‘there are insufficient benefits for people in need’.² Table 1 provides the wording of the survey questions. All of the items are measured on a five-point scale with higher scores indicating stronger perceptions of mis-targeting.

For our individual-level covariates, we use a measure of subjective *income* (because the measure of objective income has a high level of non-response), which asks people how they feel about their household income currently, offering four answer categories from ‘living comfortably’ to ‘finding it very difficult on present income’. We include variables measuring employment status (the item measures ‘what have you been doing for the last seven days’): *paid work* (reference category), *unemployed* (both *actively* looking for a job and *not actively* looking for a job), *retired*, *permanently sick or disabled*, and *other non-labor* (community work, housework, other). To measure people’s experience with relying on benefits, we add *unemployment history*, a dummy item asking a respondent whether he or she has been unemployed for more than 3 months during the previous 5 years.

For ideological position, we use the *left/right self-placement scale* (scale 0–10) split into three dummy variables: left (score 0–3, reference), middle (4–6), right (7–10). For *interpersonal trust*, we compute a means scale from three variables (scale 0–10) stating: ‘would you say that most

people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?', 'do you think that most people would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance, or would they try to be fair?' and 'would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful or that they are mostly looking out for themselves?' Over the 25 countries, these items have an average scale reliability coefficient (alpha) of .75. For institutional trust, we computed a means scale of five variables (Scale 0–10): 'how much you personally trust each of the institutions: the parliament, the legal system, the police, politicians, political parties'. Over the 25 countries, this scale has an average scale reliability coefficient (alpha) of .87. We use dummy variables for education as an additional measure of structural position: (less than) *primary education* (reference category), *lower secondary education*, *higher secondary education* and *tertiary education*. Finally, we add two control variables: *gender* (reference category: male) and *age* in years.

For the contextual-level measures, we use two different measures to assess a redistributive effect. These measures correlate $r = .44$. First, we use the traditional measure of *social spending* as the amount of expenditure on social protection as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) from Eurostat for 2008 (which has a high correlation with expenditures in previous years). Second, we calculate the difference between the percentage of the population 'at risk of poverty before social transfers' and the percentage 'at risk of poverty after social transfers' and use that as a measure for *redistributive effect*. Both are Eurostat measures from 2008. For the measurement of universal and selective policies, we use regime typologies as proxies because of a lack of comparable institutional data for our 25 countries. We indicate the Anglo-Saxon countries (IE and GB) as having the most *targeted benefits* and the Scandinavian countries (DK, FI, NO, SE) as having the most *universal benefits* (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Korpi and Palme, 1998). We expect the conservative (CH, BE, DE, FR, NL), the post-Communist (BG, CZ, EE, HR, HU, LV, PL, RO, SK, SI) and the Mediterranean (CY, ES, GR, PT) countries to be in between. We take the conservative regime as a reference category. For the *unemployment rate*, we use Eurostat data from 2008 measuring unemployed persons as a percentage of the labor force. For *unemployment rate change*, we use the difference between the unemployment rate in 2007 and the unemployment rate in 2008. The descriptive statistics for all of the context variables can be found in Table 5 in Appendix 1.

Methodological approach

Our analysis proceeds in two steps. First, we apply confirmatory factor analysis to a range of models that express different relationships between the mis-targeting items. We test three different approaches. First, we test the idea that all overuse and underuse perceptions are part of a larger general perception of the mis-targeting of benefits. All of the items load on the same 'mis-targeting' factor (Model 1). Second, we test the conclusion reached by previous scholars, who suggested that overuse and underuse are two different types of mis-targeting perceptions. Here, the overuse items load on an overuse factor, whereas the underuse items load on an underuse factor (Model 2). Third, with two models (Model 3a and Model 3b), we test the idea that overuse and underuse perceptions are driven by underlying attitudes related to perceptions of moral flaws and administrative mistakes in mis-targeting. In these models, overuse and underuse items could share some content over different factors, that is, these models allow for cross-loadings between factors. Model 3a estimates two factors that both load on all items, whereas Model 3b estimates two factors that (cross-)load on selected items. To evaluate the models, we assess two commonly used chi-square-based measures of fit: the root means square error of approximation (RMSEA) and the comparative fit index (CFI). For a good fit, the RMSEA should have a value of $< .05$; a value between .05 and .08 implicates an acceptable fit. The CFI should be $> .970$; a value between .950

and .970 is acceptable (Scherrmelleh-Engel et al., 2003). We select the model with the best fit and estimate the factor scores for the latent factors.

In the second step, the factor scores are used as dependent variables in further analysis. We employ a multilevel regression analysis to take into account the clustered structure of the data. We include both individual- and contextual-level covariates to explain the variation at the individual and country levels. We test a random intercept model in which the intercept varies over countries. We left the covariates uncentered because in random intercept models without cross-level interactions, the model is invariant for these linear transformations (Hox, 2010). We introduce only one country-level variable per model because we address a limited number of countries. We present the proportion of reduced variance at the lower end of the tables (Raudenbush and Bryk, 2002). For all of the statistical analyses, we use the program Stata 13 (StataCorp, 2013).

Results

Descriptive results of mis-targeting items

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for the different items. European people have a very strong perception of the overuse of benefits: 64 percent agree with the statement that many people manage to obtain benefits and services to which they are not entitled. Perceptions related to the aspects of overuse that can be called misuse of benefits (i.e. people who are not really looking for a job or people pretending that they are sick) are less negative: the European public seems divided about that issue, 39 percent and 38 percent, respectively, (strongly) agree with the statement, whereas 38 percent and 36 percent, respectively, (strongly) disagree. With respect to the underuse of benefits, people have a strong impression that there are insufficient benefits to help people who are deserving of welfare support: 63 percent (strongly) agree with that statement. In addition, the majority (52%) of Europeans believes that many people who are entitled to benefits do not receive them. These descriptive results are in line with previous research showing that European people perceive both high overuse and underuse of benefits. When we inspect the relationship between scales of the overuse and the underuse items, we find only a small correlation for the pooled sample on the individual level of $r = .22$. As in other studies, this shows that these attitudes are only weakly related to each other: perceiving high overuse does not necessarily mean perceiving high underuse.

Confirmatory factor analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis tests whether data fit the theorized measurement models. Table 2 presents the results of this factor analysis based on the five mis-targeting items,³ testing the three theoretical approaches discussed in the 'Methods' section. For each model, we present the estimated factor loadings and fit statistics.

The results show that as scholars previously argued, overuse and underuse perceptions do not belong to one concept of mis-targeting. Model 1, in which all items load on one factor and which measures general mis-targeting perceptions, has a poor fit, with an RMSEA of .155 and a CFI of .764.

Model 2 estimates a two-factor model in which three items load on the overuse factor and two on the underuse factor. This model tests the hypothesis that overuse and underuse perceptions are independent perceptions of mis-targeting. This model has a fit that is just around the cut-off point of a sufficient fit (the RMSEA is .080 and the CFI is .949). In other words, overuse and underuse perceptions can be observed as two independent concepts that are somewhat related to each other, although the fit of this model is borderline sufficient.

Table 2. Confirmatory factor analysis of mis-targeting perceptions.

Model	Factor	Factor loadings					Correlation F1–F2	RMSEA	CFI
		Item 1 – not find job (overuse)	Item 2 – obtain benefits (overuse)	Item 3 – pretend sick (overuse)	Item 4 – less benefits (underuse)	Item 5 – insufficient benefits (underuse)			
M1	F1	.498	.618	.533	.352	.330	–	.155	.764
	F2	–	–	–	–	–			
M2	F1	.541	.588	.584	–	–	.418	.080	.949
	F2	–	–	–	.630	.571			
M3a	F1	.083	–.151	.093	–.592	–.500	–	Just identified	Just identified
	F2	.562	.551	.620	.265	.241			
M3b	F1	.569	.455	.627	–	–	.281	.011	.999
	F2	–	.241	–	.636	.566			

RMSEA: root means square error of approximation; CFI: comparative fit index.

Model 3a, tracking two underlying patterns by letting every item tap into both factors, is only identified because the number of estimated parameters is as large as the pieces of information that this model contains (we do not allow the factors to correlate which would lead to an underidentified model). Consequently, this model has no degrees of freedom, and no fit statistics can be evaluated, which makes this model not statistically interesting.

There are several possible models that allow cross-loadings on the two factors. In order to identify the best fitting model with cross-loadings, we follow an approach which is known as ‘exploratory factor analysis within the confirmatory factor analysis framework’ (Brown, 2006; Muthén and Muthén, 2009). The result of this procedure⁴ provides us with a model in which the first factor that has significant factor loadings on the three overuse items and the second factor has significant factor loadings on one overuse item and both underuse items. We use this model in our confirmatory factor analysis. In this model (Model 3b), the first factor measures perceptions of benefit overuse. This factor contains two items that in our view clearly evaluate beneficiary intentions that are related to moral flaws (‘people do *not try* to find a job’ and ‘people *pretend* that they are sick’). This factor is not related to the underuse items. The second factor, however, consists of information from both overuse and underuse items. It loads on both the underuse items that suggest that people do not get what they deserve (‘people get less benefits than they are entitled to’ and ‘there are insufficient benefits for people in need’), and it loads on the overuse item that states that ‘people obtain benefits to which they are not entitled’. These items focus not on the intention of the beneficiary to misuse or to decline to take up benefits, but instead can be interpreted as system failures. This model (Model 3b) has a very good fit, with an RMSEA of .011 and a CFI of .999. Figure 1 presents a graphical overview of both factors.

We interpret the first factor of Model 3b, our model of choice, as normative perceptions of moral flaws in mis-targeting that constitute specific perceptions of intentional benefit abuse. People with high scores on this factor believe that people take advantage of the welfare redistribution system and intentionally aim to misuse welfare benefits or services. The second factor measures perceptions about the system’s administrative effectiveness.⁵ People with a high factor score on this factor see overuse and underuse at the same time, which can be interpreted as perceiving either an ineffective system or a system that makes administrative mistakes leading to both overuse and underuse. Both factors are correlated at $r = .28$, which suggests that they measure different attitude structures.

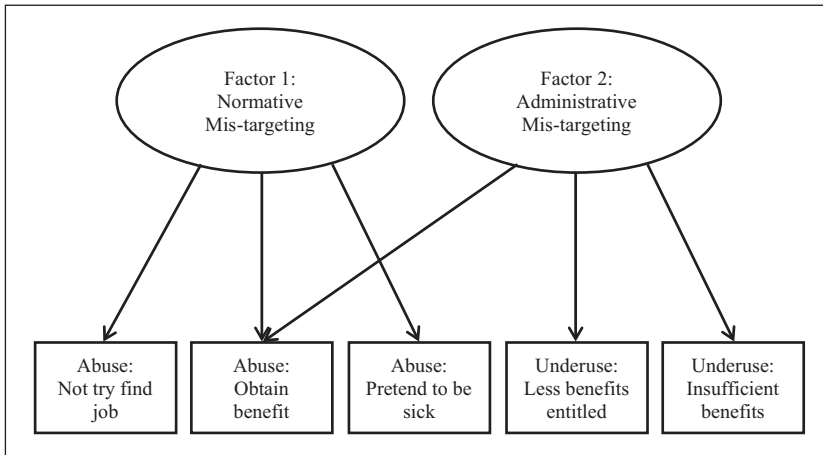


Figure 1. Two-factor model of normative and administrative perceptions of mis-targeting.

What we do not present here are the additional analyses that we employed to test the comparability of this model across countries.⁶ That is, we tested this model in a multi-group structural equation model to determine whether it is measurement equivalent and can be compared over the 25 countries in our sample (Davidov, 2008). This multi-group model has an acceptable level of measurement equivalence (partial scalar equivalence) with a sufficient model fit (RMSEA of .074).

Multilevel regression analysis

To obtain more insight into the meaning of these underlying mis-targeting perceptions, we relate them to different covariates in a random intercept multilevel regression model. We use the factor scores of the normative and administrative factor from Model 3b (Table 2) as dependent variables. First, we add the individual-level covariates (Table 3). Next, we add the country-level factors for each model separately (Table 4), including the individual-level covariates as control variables.

For the first factor of normative perceptions of mis-targeting, we see that the indicators for structural position are positively associated with normative perceptions of mis-targeting. People who are more content with their income and are less likely to be unemployed, receiving an education, disabled or sick have stronger normative perceptions of benefit abuse. Additionally, people who experienced unemployment for longer than 3 months in the previous 5 years are less inclined to see benefit abuse. These results support identification theory rather than competition theory, suggesting that people in a lower structural position and people who experienced unemployment perceive less benefit abuse because they can more easily identify with people who depend on benefits. With respect to the second factor, the effects of lower perceived incomes run in a different direction. Although we did not formulate any expectations for the effect of structural position on administrative mis-targeting perceptions, we see that people with a lower perceived income perceive more administrative mistakes. In addition, individuals who experienced unemployment for longer than 3 months are more critical of administrative effectiveness. Remarkably, people who are retired perceive both more normative and effective forms of mis-targeting.

Second, as expected and as found in previous research, we see a strong effect of right-wing political ideology on the normative perception of benefit abuse. People with a right-wing party affiliation have stronger perceptions of intentional benefit abuse. We see a smaller effect of party

Table 3. Multilevel regression models of individual covariates influencing normative and administrative perceptions of mis-targeting.

	Factor 1 – Normative perceptions of mis-targeting		Factor 2 – Administrative perceptions of mis-targeting	
	Model 0	Model 1	Model 0	Model 1
Intercept	-.003	.258***	.000	.163***
Individual-level covariates				
Subjective income		.013***		-.018***
Job status (paid work is reference category)				
In education		-.032***		-.008*
Unemployed		-.086***		.005
Disabled		-.029*		.008
Retired		.054***		.006*
Other		-.003		-.003
Unemployment history		-.020**		.013***
Left/right self-placement (left wing ref.cat.)				
Middle		.075***		-.009***
Right		.133***		-.012***
Interpersonal trust		-.026***		-.006***
Institutional trust		-.023***		-.012***
Education (primary education ref.cat.)				
Lower secondary education		-.019*		-.009**
Higher secondary education		-.066***		-.022***
Tertiary education		-.163***		-.053***
Age		-.001***		-.000
Female (male ref.cat.)		-.001		.004***
Variance components				
Group	.0186	.0131	.0053	.0027
Residuals	.1725	.1602	.0264	.0250
% Group variance explained		29.57		49.06
% Residual variance explained		7.13		5.30

Number of observations: 38,393/number of groups: 25.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, and *** $p < .001$.

ideology on administrative perceptions of mis-targeting. People who are more left-wing affiliated see more procedural problems in mis-targeting, although the effect sizes are considerably smaller. This confirms the normative character of the first mis-targeting factor compared to the procedural character of the second factor.

Third, both interpersonal and institutional distrust are strongly associated with normative perceptions of benefit abuse. People with low trust levels do not believe in others' good intentions and expect them to violate the social contract and cheat on the collective system. We see again that the effects on administrative perceptions are weaker than the effects on the normative factor. As expected, people with low trust in government institutions generally are more suspicious of the effectiveness of the implementation of government policies and therefore see a larger amount of administrative mis-targeting. This effect is twice as strong as the effect of interpersonal trust on the administrative effectiveness factor. This confirms that the second factor should be interpreted as perceptions of government failure rather than moral flaws of benefit recipients.

Table 4. Multilevel regression models of contextual covariates influencing normative and administrative perceptions of mis-targeting (controlled for all individual-level factors in Model 1).

	Factor 1 – Normative perceptions of mis-targeting						Factor 2 – Administrative perceptions of mis-targeting					
	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6		Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	
Contextual covariates												
Social spending as % GDP	-.004						-.005**					
Redistributive effect		.004						-.001				
Welfare regime (conservative ref.cat.)												
Scandinavian			-.091						.003			
Anglo-Saxon			.216**						.046			
Post-Communist			.077						.075***			
Mediterranean			.080						.083***			
Unemployment rate				.012						.014***		
Unemployment rate change					-.005						-.006	
Variance components												
Group	.0125	.0126	.0067	.0124	.0131		.0021	.0027	.0015	.0019	.0027	
Residuals	.1602	.1602	.1602	.1602	.1602		.0250	.0250	.0250	.0250	.0250	
% Group variance explained	32.80	32.26	63.98	33.33	29.57		60.38	49.06	71.70	64.15	49.06	
% Residual variance explained	7.13	7.13	7.13	7.13	7.13		5.30	5.30	5.30	5.30	5.30	

GDP: gross domestic product.

Number of observations: 38,393/number of groups: 25.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, and *** $p < .001$.

Finally, for both factors, a higher level of education means weaker perceptions of both normative and administrative mis-targeting. Although this is an indirect measure, we explain this effect by the fact that people who are more highly educated can be better informed about the actual implementation of welfare redistribution and how the government attempts to minimize both abuse and under-use. The effect of educational background supports results from previous research on experiments about tax attitudes: the more information that people have and the more details that they know about the actual redistribution system, the more positive they are (Eriksen and Fallan, 1996).

The individual factors only explain approximately 5–7 percent of the individual-level variation of the administrative and normative factors, respectively. However, there is a strong composition effect. In normative and administrative perceptions of mis-targeting, 29 percent and 49 percent of the country variation, respectively, is explained by the composition of categories of individuals in these countries. This composition effect is mostly related to the Eastern and Southern European countries, where there are relatively more people with lower trust levels and people in lower structural positions than in the Northern and Western European countries.

Looking at the country-level effects that are presented for each model in Table 4, we see no effect of the amount of redistribution. In Model 2, social spending has no significant effect on normative perceptions of benefit abuse, and the effect of our alternative measure of redistributive impact in Model 3 is not significant. There is no evidence for the idea that people see benefit abuse because they feel that tax money is wasted. Low levels of social spending in a country are associated with the perception that there is administrative mis-targeting of benefits, most likely because people in low-spending countries see that those in need do not receive that to which they are entitled because they do not belong to the target population. However, this effect is not strong, and little additional variance is explained. Our alternative measure of the amount of redistribution has no significant effect on administrative mis-targeting.

The welfare state regime types explain many variations at the country level in Model 4. We see that for normative perceptions of mis-targeting, the Anglo-Saxon regime has a strong positive effect and is the most important country-level factor associated with perceptions of benefit abuse. That supports our theory that in welfare states that historically have been more selective in their targeting of welfare policies, people are more suspicious of abuse. In welfare states with targeted benefits, there are more eligibility criteria and therefore, there are more rules that can be broken. Although welfare states have been developed from these regime types, the perceptions that people will easily break the rules and cheat the welfare system seem to be culturally anchored. Against expectations, we do not find any significant effect of the Anglo-Saxon countries on administrative mis-targeting perceptions. This suggests that targeted benefit schemes do not influence perceptions of administrative mis-targeting. We do find that the post-Communist and Mediterranean types of welfare regimes have strong effects on the administrative dimension. We believe that these effects are less related to the institutional design of the redistribution than they are to the economic challenges that confront these welfare regimes (Cerami, 2008; Ferrera, 1996). The lower quality and quantity of these welfare states make people more suspicious about whether the state is able to redistribute to the perceived target population, that is, the people in need of support.

Finally, in Models 5 and 6, we introduce our indicators of economic hardship. Neither unemployment indicator has a significant effect on the normative factor. There is no support for either the idea that economic hardship increases sympathy with the beneficiaries or the idea that it increases competitiveness over scarce resources. However, as previously noted, this might be because with a lack of longitudinal data, we cannot model this accurately. The unemployment rate does have a positive effect on the administrative factor. This confirms our previous observation that people who live in welfare states that face more economic difficulties are more critical about whether the state is able to target benefits to all who are in need of support.

Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this study was to broaden our understanding of perceptions of the mis-targeting of welfare benefits and the individual and contextual factors associated with these perceptions. We contributed to the literature by disentangling normative and administrative perceptions of mis-targeting in benefit overuse and underuse and associate these aspects with different individual- and contextual-level variables.

We found that Europeans not only strongly perceive abuse and misuse of benefits but also perceive substantial underuse of benefits. Using confirmatory factor analysis, we found that these strong perceptions of the overuse and the underuse of benefits contain more complex underlying attitudinal positions. Perceptions of overuse and underuse are not an expression of one underlying perception of mis-targeting, nor are they two independent dimensions. Instead, we found that underlying attitudes toward mis-targeting can best be captured in one normative factor that expresses perceptions of moral flaws of benefit recipients, and in one administrative factor that is positively related to both benefit overuse and underuse and expresses perceptions of administrative failure or an ineffective targeting by the welfare state.

Our interpretation of these different factors is confirmed by the results of a multilevel regression analysis in which we associated individual covariates as structural position (now and in the past), education, ideological affiliation, and interpersonal and institutional trust to the normative and administrative factors of mis-targeting. We confirmed that normative perceptions of mis-targeting are more strongly related to structural position and political ideology, whereas administrative perceptions were more related to country-level differences. Additionally, low-trusting individuals see more mis-targeting in general and more benefit abuse in particular. Distrust in government institutions is more strongly related than interpersonal distrust to administrative mis-targeting. Having a higher education is positively associated with lower perceptions of mis-targeting, which we interpret as an indirect effect of having more detailed information about government redistribution. These covariates explain a modest amount of variation at the individual level but account for a strong composition effect that explains a substantial amount of variation among countries.

We also added country-level covariates, in which we found that the most important country-level determinant of normative perceptions of mis-targeting is the Anglo-Saxon welfare regime. We explain this by the fact that Anglo-Saxon countries historically developed targeted benefit schemes, although those systems have become more hybrid over time. These schemes put more effort into determining whether benefit claimants are really deserving of benefits and focus more on detecting the possible abuse or misuse of benefits. It seems that as a result, perceived overuse is higher in these welfare states. The most important determinant for administrative perceptions of mis-targeting seems to be the economic situation and the actual quality of the welfare state. People living in welfare states confronted by stronger economic challenges and unemployment see more ineffective targeting of benefits.

Unfortunately, due to the relatively small number of countries studied, we were not able to include many covariates at the contextual level. This restricted us in exploring the combination of contextual factors in combination in more detail. To be able to weight the relative impact of these contextual effects, we need to be able to control for more country-level factors. The fact that only cross-sectional data were available prevented us from accurately estimating the effect of economic hardship on perceptions of mis-targeting. In addition, the unavailability of data about actual overuse and underuse of benefits was a limitation of this study.

In conclusion, it is fair to say that in all European countries, not only overuse perceptions but also underuse perceptions are a potential threat to the legitimacy of the welfare state. These perceptions are expressions of both normative perceptions of moral flaws in benefit abuse and

perceptions of administrative mistakes. If governments want to address potential threats to the legitimacy of the welfare state, they need to take into account that mis-targeting perceptions are based upon both moral and administrative flaws in the system of welfare redistribution that should be tackled in different ways.

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Notes

1. We excluded four countries from our sample (Israel, Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine) because we want to focus our analyses on European countries.
2. We note that the term 'insufficient benefits' can be interpreted as 'inadequate benefits' or as 'benefits that are lacking'. In the former case, the item can be seen as a measure of mis-targeting, but in the latter case, it is possible to discuss whether this item measures support for more benefit schemes in general. The correlation of this item with items that measure support for a stronger governmental role, however, is substantially smaller than the correlation with the other underuse item. We argue that this item is therefore suitable to measure underuse perceptions.
3. We treated the items as though they have an interval scale although they are, strictly speaking, ordinal. We tested all of these models by also treating the items as ordinal data. This analysis showed comparable results. Because no RMSEA fit statistic is provided when specifying categorical items, we decided to present the results based on the interval scale. Results are available from the first author.
4. The 'exploratory factor analysis in the confirmatory factor analysis framework' approach proceeds as follows. As a first step, an exploratory factor analysis with rotated factors is estimated. For each factor, the item with the highest loading is defined as anchor item. The cross-loadings of the anchor items on the other factors are defined as zero. All other factor loadings are free. Factor variances are fixed to one. Next, this model is estimated as confirmatory factor model. For each of the factor loadings, standard errors are available, so that statistical significance can be determined (Brown, 2006; Muthén and Muthén, 2009). Following this procedure for Factor 1, 'people pretend to be sick' and for Factor 2 'people get less benefit than they are entitled to' are defined as anchor items and their cross-loadings on the other factors are set to zero. In the confirmatory factor analysis, we find insignificant cross-loadings for 'people do not try to find a job' on Factor 2 and 'there are insufficient benefits for people in need' on Factor 1. As a result, in this model, the first factor loads on the three overuse items, and Factor 2 loads on 'people obtain benefits they are not deserving of' and the two underuse items. We use this model for further analysis.
5. To validate the interpretation of this administrative effectiveness factor, we relate its country-level scores related to a contextual-level measure of government effectiveness, which is based upon different opinion surveys of experts, institutions and enterprises evaluating the effectiveness of the state (World Bank – Worldwide Governance Indicators). The correlation between these variables is $r = -.80$, which prompts the conclusion that the interpretation of this factor is valid. The correlation between the normative factor (country level) and government effectiveness is much smaller: $r = -.51$.
6. Results available from the first author.

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Appendix I

Table 5. Descriptive statistics for contextual-level covariates.

Contextual covariate	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Social spending as % GDP	22.45	5.38	12.70	31.29
Redistributional effect	24.28	5.75	11.8	39.7
Scandinavian countries	0.16	0.37	0	1
Anglo-Saxon countries	0.08	0.28	0	1
Conservative countries	0.20	0.41	0	1
Post-Communist countries	0.40	0.50	0	1
Mediterranean countries	0.16	0.37	0	1
Unemployment rate	6.33	2.10	2.5	11.3
Unemployment rate change	-0.20	1.18	-2.5	3.1

GDP: gross domestic product.